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ABSTRACT

The period from kindergarten through second grade is a critical time for developing basic reading skills. This report focuses primarily on assessment of reading in early elementary school. The report discusses what is known about making assessment meaningful and describes what the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states are doing about assessment. The following SREB states' practices are outlined: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Other SREB states mentioned in the report are: Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The following key points are discussed in the report: (1) assessment should not be delayed past the middle of first grade; (2) assessment should be ongoing throughout the school year; (3) assessment should be aligned with state curriculum standards; (4) most SREB states do not require all schools to use one particular assessment; and (5) no SREB state uses early reading assessments for accountability purposes. (NKA)

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Reading Reform in the SREB States: Early Assessment

SREB

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Reading remains one of the hottest topics regionwide and nationwide. As concern over poor reading has grown and new research has emerged on ways to prevent reading failure, most SREB states have undertaken efforts to improve reading instruction, especially in the early grades.

The media too often characterize the reading debate as a question of phonics vs. whole language. This oversimplified either/or characterization misses the real point. In fact, all students must master the word-recognition skills embodied in phonics to become good readers. All students also need the broad exposure to and practice in reading a variety of quality materials that are central to the whole-language philosophy. But different students need different degrees of emphasis on these and other aspects of reading instruction.

The term "balanced" often is used to describe reading instruction that incorporates the strengths of both phonics and whole language. There is no single combination of instructional techniques that works best for every child in every classroom. Instead, balance requires teachers to choose from numerous instructional strategies to provide a balance that is appropriate for each child.

To provide reading instruction that is appropriately balanced for all children, teachers must be able to assess children's strengths and weaknesses accurately. Unfortunately, many teachers lack the knowledge and ability either to assess children's reading abilities or to design instructional programs that respond effectively to their needs. As a result, too many children reach middle school — and even high school — with poor reading ability.

Ensuring that all children become successful readers will require a long-term commitment and sustained resources. State reading initiatives face three key challenges: 1) developing meaningful, early assessments for reading; 2) ensuring that teachers have the instructional tools they need to teach a variety of children; and 3) providing effective remediation for children who get past early elementary school without adequate reading skills. This report focuses primarily on assessment of reading in early elementary school. Subsequent reports will address the other challenges.

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The Importance of Early Intervention

Research consistently shows the importance of early intervention in helping children become successful readers. The longer serious reading difficulties persist, the more difficult they are to correct.

If children's reading problems are not corrected early, they fall farther and farther behind because, as two prominent reading researchers have said, "they are not exposed to the vocabulary, the background information and the complex ideas found in books. Because children who can't read aren't able to access all the information taught during the school day, they may miss out on important content. So a reading problem, allowed to go untreated, has a cumulative debilitating effect." *

In addition, research on brain development indicates that there are "windows of opportunity" for the development of certain brain functions, such as reading. Both the brain research and the research on preventing reading failure suggest that it becomes more difficult to learn to read after about age 10.

Early Reading Assessment

Assessment of children to identify reading problems is essential to early, effective intervention. But simply knowing which children have problems is not enough. The assessment used also must provide information that can help teachers design instructional programs that address the individual child's strengths and weaknesses.

Few topics provoke stronger feelings, both pro and con, than early assessment of young children. Many early childhood educators and specialists in child development oppose any testing of young children. They are worried, often with good reason, that test results will be misused in ways that are detrimental to children. To reduce the risk of misuse, children should be tested at the appropriate age and educators should use only assessments that have been proven valid both for identifying reading problems and for guiding instructional decisions. In addition, as the National Research Council noted in a recent report, a single test should not be the sole basis for high-stakes decisions about individual children, such as those relating to promotion or the need for special services. Other factors, such as teacher observation, also should be considered.

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* Susan L. Hall and Louisa C. Moats, *Straight Talk About Reading*, Contemporary Books, Chicago, 1999.

While earlier assessments may be accurate for some children, research clearly shows that the last half of the kindergarten year and the first half of first grade are the best times to identify reading problems. Because of developmental differences among children of comparable ages, reading assessments administered before the last half of kindergarten consistently mislabel children "at-risk" when they are not and fail to identify children who are at risk. It is also clear that if initial reading assessment is delayed beyond the middle of first grade, valuable time is lost and it is harder to correct serious difficulties for some children.

Reading assessment should not be regarded as a one-shot affair. Once children's reading needs have been accurately assessed in late kindergarten or early first grade, ongoing assessment is important to determine whether those needs are being met. Ongoing assessment also is necessary to identify late-developing problems, such as those that involve comprehension of more complex materials.

A more complicated problem is identifying assessments that yield valid, reliable results that are useful for making instructional decisions. Most SREB states require that, in order for an assessment to be used, there must be some valid research evidence that demonstrates its effectiveness. A further complication arises from efforts in many states to identify assessments that can be used for school accountability. While some assessments could serve both instructional and accountability purposes reliably, many could not. Using a single assessment to serve both purposes also raises the possibility of conflict of interest in the way teachers view the tests. If they know the results will be used to rate their own or their school's performance, teachers might be less objective about identifying children with reading problems. Because of these concerns, no SREB state has included scores on early reading assessments in its statewide accountability efforts.

Alabama

The **Alabama Reading Initiative** is a comprehensive and cooperative effort to address reading concerns on multiple levels. The first state funding specifically for reading reform did not come until the 1999 legislative session, but the state's business and civic communities joined with public schools and universities to raise more than $500,000 to start the project in 1997. The $6 million appropriated for the reading initiative in 1999 will fund a fourfold increase in the number of schools identified as **Literacy Demonstration Sites.**

To provide teachers with a diagnostic tool to get useful information on individual students' instructional needs, the Alabama Department of Education contracted with a major publisher

of educational materials to develop assessments for kindergarten, first grade and second grade. The new **Alabama Diagnostic Reading Assessments** are administered in the fall of the school year and are designed both to serve instructional purposes and to provide statewide information on children's readiness for school at each grade level. The standardized assessment used to produce statewide data is kept under tight security to protect the integrity of results. However, each school is provided with a parallel "classroom form" to use in ongoing assessment throughout the year. The classroom form is keyed to the results of the fall assessment so that it can be used to monitor children's progress in order to determine appropriate instruction. Unlike the secured assessment, the classroom version can be used out of grade level if appropriate. (For example, an advanced first-grader could use a second-grade assessment to help the teacher make more appropriate decisions about instruction.)

Classroom teachers administer the assessment. In kindergarten and first grade, the assessment is administered one-on-one and takes about 25 minutes. In second grade, half is administered one-on-one and half in groups. The kindergarten assessment addresses children's awareness of letter/sound relationships; concepts of print; alphabet knowledge; and ability to tell stories. The subtest in each area has a raw score that can be combined with the teacher's own observations to determine which area or areas require the most attention for each student. The first-grade assessment measures these basic skills at more advanced levels and also addresses listening comprehension. In second grade, the focus shifts to reading comprehension, oral reading accuracy and fluency.

The new assessment first was used in 1998-99 in the 16 schools initially selected as Literacy Demonstration Sites. During the summer of 1998, the faculties of these schools attended 10 days of training designed with two goals: 1) to teach them how to administer the assessment and use the results in making instructional decisions; and 2) to improve their general skills in teaching reading. Each faculty member who attended the training received a stipend of $50 per day. The assessments will be administered statewide for the first time in the fall of 1999.

Arkansas

Arkansas passed legislation in 1997 that required students in kindergarten through third grade who do not perform at grade level during the school year to attend summer school in order to be eligible for promotion to the next grade. Schools were encouraged to identify students with reading problems as early as possible so that they could receive intensive reading instruction during the school year. The legislation did not specifically address how children were to be assessed.

In 1998, the governor announced his **Smart Start** initiative, with the goal that "all children will meet or exceed grade-level requirements in reading and mathematics by grade four." (Arkansas' Smart Start is different from North Carolina's widely publicized Smart Start program, which focuses on getting children ready to enter school.) The Arkansas initiative coordinates four broad areas: standards, staff development, student assessment and accountability.

In 1999, the Arkansas General Assembly changed the recommendation that schools conduct early reading assessments to *require* all schools to conduct ongoing, informal assessments in kindergarten through fourth grade. The state Department of Education is developing checklists for schools to use in monitoring students' progress and has contracted with an outside agency to develop performance assessments that are aligned with the state's required curriculum.

In addition to the new state-mandated assessment, many Arkansas schools have Reading Recovery programs for first-graders whom teachers have identified as potentially at risk of reading failure. These children are assessed on six measures: letter identification; known words; concepts about print (such as which way to hold a book and which direction to read a line); writing vocabulary; ability to hear and replicate sounds; and text reading level. Children who are most at risk of reading failure are given 30 minutes of one-on-one tutoring every day for up to 20 weeks.

(Note: A 1996 SREB report, *Getting Elementary Schools Ready for Children: Reading First,* dealt with the Reading Recovery program in general and particularly its impact in Arkansas.)

Georgia

Georgia's **Reading First** program also focuses on assessment. To be eligible for state funding under the program, elementary schools must agree to provide at least three hours of reading instruction every day. The instruction must include three components: direct phonics instruction, reading general literature, and reading in content areas, such as social studies and science.

The needed balance of the three types of instruction is expected to vary for different children and will change as they progress, making ongoing assessment necessary. Reading First recommends using the **Basic Literacy Test (BLT)** for this ongoing assessment. The BLT measures progressively higher-level skills in three areas: phonics, basic words that should be recognized on sight, and oral reading and comprehension. The assessment was developed by the Georgia Department of Education, with some portions created by department staff and some drawn from existing sources.

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Assessment begins with the Kindergarten BLT, which assesses literacy skills typically mastered before children enter first grade. Children take the main portion of the assessment at the beginning of first grade, and the results are used to determine each student's reading level so that instruction can begin at that point. From then on, the assessment is used on an ongoing basis until the student achieves a score of 100, which is the equivalent of a fifth-grade reading level.

The BLT scoring form travels with each student from grade to grade, and it becomes a part of the student's permanent record when he or she achieves a score of 100. In **Reading Challenge**, a companion program aimed at students in middle and high school, some students in high school still are working to achieve a score of 100.

Although the BLT is administered one-on-one, the time required is reduced because the entire assessment is not given at one time. Children are assessed only to the point at which they begin to experience difficulties, and subsequent assessments begin at that point.

Reading First schools are required to use the standard scoring sheet, but they can use alternative assessments as long as those assessments measure the items on the scoring sheet as well as or better than the BLT.

For the Basic Literacy Test to be used effectively, all personnel who administer it in any given school or school system must have the same standards for each skill assessed. The department has developed a training package, which includes more than three hours of videotape, to train teachers in the administration and interpretation of the BLT and in the instructional techniques needed to teach each skill. Only those who have been trained are permitted to administer the BLT. Through the end of the 1998-99 school year, more than 1,000 teachers and administrators — representing more than 350 schools (about 30 percent of the state's elementary schools) — had completed the three-day training program. Each participant received an instructional package to use in training his or her colleagues.

Statewide standards have not been developed for the BLT. The Department of Education feels that schools are more likely to develop a sense of ownership and commitment to the Reading First program if they can reach their own consensus about standards. Locally determined standards must fall within clearly defined parameters that are established in the training.

Because it is not standardized, the BLT cannot be used for accountability purposes at this time, and there are no immediate plans to change that fact. However, the revised **Georgia Kindergarten**

Assessment Program, which is administered at the beginning of kindergarten, is standardized and linked directly to the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum. This program includes some literacy skills and will be used for accountability purposes. Like the BLT, the kindergarten assessment travels with the child until all areas have been mastered, at which time it becomes part of the student's permanent record.

Reading First schools are required to test students at the end of first and second grades using the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). (All Georgia schools must use the ITBS at the end of third, fifth and eighth grades.) The use of the ITBS enables educators to assess whether the BLT has been used effectively to design instructional programs that meet students' needs. ITBS results in 1997-98 showed that reading scores in Reading First schools improved significantly in first and second grades, while third-grade scores remained essentially the same. Preliminary data for 1998-99 suggest similar results. Program staff believe these results indicate that the instructional strategies being used in third grade are too much like those used in grades one and two and need to be revised to be more age-appropriate.

Louisiana

In 1997, the Louisiana state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education authorized the state Department of Education to develop or adopt a uniform way of assessing students' progress in reading in kindergarten through grade three. The department assembled a committee of teachers, reading specialists, university faculty and department staff. The committee decided that two types of assessment were needed for younger and older students.

After reviewing 17 reading assessments produced commercially, the committee overwhelmingly recommended — and the board adopted — the **Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)** for use in grades one, two and three. (Under the scoring guide established by the committee for rating the assessments, the DRA received twice as many points as the next-closest assessment.) Beginning in 1998-99, every Louisiana school is required to administer the DRA to assess reading fluency and comprehension and writing skills at the end of first grade and at the beginning and end of second and third grades. While DRA results allow comparisons of achievement among schools, the assessment is intended primarily for instructional purposes, and it is not part of the state's accountability formula.

The DRA, which must be administered one-on-one by the classroom teacher, provides information on each student's reading level and strengths and weaknesses that the teacher can use to design an appropriate instructional program. A cumulative record of oral reading performance accompanies each student throughout the year to allow monitoring of progress.

The reactions to the DRA were largely negative when it first was administered at the beginning of 1998-99. Teachers were skeptical about its usefulness and concerned about the time required to administer it. The department responded by producing a staff development video designed to address frequently heard concerns and sent a copy to every school in the state. The video helped to clear up many areas of confusion. The end-of-year assessment went much more smoothly, and teachers began to appreciate the assessment's ability to provide important information about children's instructional needs. Some schools even have decided to use it three times a year, rather than the two times required by the state.

A principal concern about the DRA has been the time required for the one-on-one assessments. While the assessment's author says that the assessment should take 15 to 20 minutes per student in second and third grades, many teachers have reported needing up to 45 minutes. Department of Education staff say the assessment will take less time as teachers gain experience using it and that, because much of the assessment time is spent in silent reading by the student, it should be possible for teachers to work with more than one student at a time. They concede, however, that the assessment does take time and that it is an additional task for teachers to perform.

While the Developmental Reading Assessment was being introduced in 1998-99, work also was progressing on the development of an original assessment called the **Louisiana Literacy Profile.** The Literacy Profile, which is to be used in kindergarten and early first grade and with children who are making slow progress in later grades, assesses pre-reading skills, such as awareness that words are composed of separate sounds, familiarity with books and print (for example, knowing which side is the top of a page or that reading is from left to right on the page) and comprehension of meaning of something read aloud. Teachers are to use the Literacy Profile as a checklist for documenting students' progress toward real reading.

The Literacy Profile was field-tested in spring 1999 and will be used in selected school systems during the 1999-2000 school year. Unlike the DRA, it will not be mandated or used for reporting or scoring purposes.

Mississippi

Mississippi does not have a state-required reading assessment. However, as part of the state reading initiative, the Department of Education has developed **Reading Instructional Intervention Supplements** as the basis for assessment and instruction in kindergarten through grade eight. The supplements provide benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do; grade-level assessments to determine whether benchmarks are being met; and instructional strategies for intervention to help individual children meet the benchmarks. The supplements have been used widely statewide, and feedback suggests that they are among the most useful resources from the department.

The **Mississippi Student Achievement Act of 1999** requires the state Board of Education and superintendent to develop an accountability system to accredit all schools on the basis of annual student assessments beginning in grade three. (Accountability previously was at the district level.) There will be no assessment for accountability purposes in kindergarten and grades one and two, but the state clearly recognizes the importance of those early grades to students' later performance. To provide consistency in the way schools assess young students' instructional needs, the department plans to seek proposals for the development of diagnostic assessments to be used by all schools in kindergarten, first grade and second grade. The second-grade end-of-grade results on the new assessment will provide the baseline for measuring schools' progress in later grades.

North Carolina

North Carolina has been struggling with the issue of early assessment since 1988, when the General Assembly prohibited schools from using state funds for standardized testing prior to third grade. In lieu of standardized tests, the state Board of Education and the Department of Public Instruction were directed to develop the ***Grades 1 and 2 Assessment in English Language Arts and Mathematics.*** The new assessment was to provide information that would be useful in making decisions about the instructional needs of individual children.

The assessment developed in response to this legislation never was implemented fully statewide. Although the 1988 legislation banned the use of state funds for standardized testing in first and second grades, it did not mandate the use of the new assessment. There also never were sufficient funds to train more than a fraction of the state's elementary school faculty in how to administer and interpret the assessment.

The situation was complicated further when the reading portion of the new assessment was caught up in the debate over whether North Carolina's reading instruction should be based on phonics or whole language. Gradually, however, consensus began to build around the concept of "balanced" reading instruction, in which teachers draw from a range of instructional skills to meet the learning needs of individual children. As always, the ability to design individualized instructional programs would require accurate assessment of each child's needs.

In 1997, the state Board of Education adopted the ***Comprehensive Reading Plan for North Carolina Public Schools,*** which reflected the balanced approach to reading instruction. Under the plan, the ***North Carolina Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts*** was revised to provide detailed guidance on how to ensure that all students master fundamental word-recognition skills and are given plenty of opportunities to read quality materials at an appropriate level of difficulty. Grade-level benchmarks designed to provide a basis for assessing individual children's needs were linked directly to the changes in the curriculum, and the reading portion of the first- and second-grade assessment was revised to reflect the changes. A kindergarten assessment also was added.

To ensure teachers' ability to assess children accurately and then design appropriate learning programs, the legislature provided more than $5 million for professional development. Undergraduate teacher-education programs also began modifying their curricula to make sure that graduates possessed these skills.

Finally, to ensure that all North Carolina children are assessed according to the same standards, the state board adopted a policy in early 1999 requiring all schools to administer reading and math assessments in kindergarten through second grade that monitor students' achievement of the benchmarks in the Standard Course of Study. The assessments must include "documented, ongoing, individualized assessments throughout the year and a summative evaluation at the end of the year." The policy specifies four purposes for the assessments:

- to provide information about each student's progress for use in making decisions regarding instruction and early intervention;
- to provide students' teachers for the next year with information about the status of their incoming classes;
- to inform parents about how their children's performance measures up to grade-level standards at the end of the year; and

- to provide the school and school district with information about the overall achievement and progress of students in kindergarten, first grade and second grade.

Schools may use either the state assessment, a modified version of it, or a "unique" assessment adopted by the local school board.

(Note: A 1998 SREB report, *North Carolina Strives for Balanced Reading Instruction,* describes the issues and events that led up to North Carolina's adoption of the Comprehensive Reading Plan.)

South Carolina

In 1979, South Carolina began requiring all incoming first-graders to take a test to determine their readiness for school. Teachers were supposed to use results from the test in planning appropriate instructional activities to meet individual children's needs. In fact, while the test provided some general information about individual children's needs, it was not ideal for making detailed instructional decisions. The test did enable South Carolina to track the overall readiness levels of the state's first-graders and to document steady improvements in that area. Test results also showed the effectiveness of the state-funded preschool program and, more recently, supported the move to full-day kindergarten.

With the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998, the General Assembly mandated that the state Department of Education "develop, select, or adapt" first- and second-grade readiness tests tied directly to the state's academic standards for each grade. The legislation specified that the tests are "not to be used as an accountability measure at the state level."

Beginning in spring 1999, the **Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT)** were required in grades three through eight as part of the state's accountability program for schools. (The PACT replaced the South Carolina Basic Skills Assessment Program, which had been in place since 1978.) Optional PACT assessments were developed for grades one and two, but they were not used widely during the first round of testing. The new first- and second-grade readiness assessments will be administered for the first time in the 2000-01 school year. While the results will not be used for accountability purposes in grades one and two, the results on the second-grade assessment will be used to establish a baseline for measuring student progress on the PACT assessment.

Texas

In Texas, where reading is one of the governor's highest priorities, the Legislature in 1997 directed the commissioner of education to adopt a list of reading assessments from which schools could select to assess children's reading levels and diagnose reading problems in kindergarten and grades one and two.

Ten criteria were identified for evaluation of early reading assessments:

- The assessment must be intended for use in kindergarten, first grade and/or second grade.
- The time needed to administer the assessment must be reasonable.
- The assessment must measure early reading skills, such as letter recognition, letter/sound relationships, word recognition and comprehension of passages.
- The assessment must be administered to each student individually.
- A classroom teacher must be able to administer the assessment.
- If it is norm-referenced, the sample used to establish the norm must be appropriate in size and in groups represented. Criterion-referenced tests also may be considered.
- There must be evidence that the assessment is reliable.
- There must be evidence that the assessment is valid enough for identifying reading problems and guiding decisions about instruction.
- Data related to the assessment's reliability and validity must be established by independent research.
- The assessment's scoring structure should yield a separate score for each reading skill included to allow for instructional planning.

The ***Reading Instruments Guide for Texas Public Schools and School Districts,*** published in May 1998, included approved assessments in both English and Spanish. Of about 100 assessments reviewed in the initial round, 10 (nine in English, one in Spanish) met the criteria for approval. One of the approved English assessments, the **Texas Primary Reading Inventory** (TPRI), was developed by the Texas Education Agency specifically for use in Texas.

The list of approved assessments includes the commissioner's recommendations for administering them, including guidelines for deciding whether children from Spanish-speaking backgrounds should be assessed in Spanish, English or both. The recommendations clearly state that "no administration should take place before the second half of the school year in kindergarten" for any of the approved assessments.

The state will purchase any of the assessments on the list; if districts choose assessments that are not on the list, they must pay for those themselves. Evaluations of additional assessments will be ongoing, and the list will be updated regularly. Many school districts, including the Houston Independent School District, have selected the TPRI.

The legislation requiring the development of the assessment list explicitly prohibits using the results for staff appraisals and incentives or for accountability under the Texas Education Code.

(Note: A 1997 SREB report, *The Texas Reading Initiative: Mobilizing Resources for Literacy,* describes the many facets of the state's ambitious efforts in reading.)

Virginia

The Virginia General Assembly in 1997 established the **Early Intervention Reading Initiative** to provide first-graders who have reading difficulties with an additional 2.5 hours of reading instruction every week during the school year. The legislation included $450,000 for the purchase or development of an appropriate assessment to identify students with early reading deficits. The Virginia Department of Education contracted with the University of Virginia School of Education to develop such an assessment.

The resulting assessment — **PALS, for Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening** — is tied to the ***English Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools.*** PALS focuses on the essential literacy skills, including awareness that words are made up of distinct sounds, knowledge of the alphabet and letter sounds, and concepts of word and word recognition. It is designed for use in matching early reading instruction directly to students' specific needs. The assessment may be administered individually or in groups of no more than five children.

To qualify for incentive funding under the Early Intervention Reading Initiative, school systems must agree to use PALS or obtain state approval for a comparable alternative assessment. School systems may choose to use PALS in either kindergarten or first grade; there is a different scoring

scale at each level to allow for developmental differences between 5- and 6-year-olds. Participating schools are required to administer the assessment in the fall and are encouraged to administer it again in the spring or at the end of the year. Beginning in 1999-2000, all children with reading difficulties who have received extra help must be assessed again in the spring.

Participation in the Early Intervention Reading Initiative is optional for school systems. There are 132 systems in the state, and 125 of them (95 percent) chose to participate during the 1998-99 school year. Of those, 121 use PALS and four use an approved alternative assessment.

Other SREB states

Delaware has no state policy on reading assessment in kindergarten and first grade. Separate task forces of the **Delaware Commission on Reading Success** are considering assessment needs in kindergarten/first grade and in grades two through four. The **Delaware State Testing Program** assesses children's reading skills at the end of third and fourth grades, primarily for purposes of school accountability. There is a proposal to add second grade to the testing program.

Florida passed legislation in 1997 that requires intensive reading instruction for students who "exhibit substantial deficiency" in reading in grades one through three. Students who receive this extra help must be assessed again at the beginning of the following grade. Through the 1998-99 school year, the state Department of Education has not had any official policies on assessment, and local districts choose which assessments to use. The department collects and disseminates examples of assessments that local school districts are using. However, the state is developing a uniform assessment to be used statewide as part of the governor's recently announced reading initiative.

Kentucky has no required reading assessment for kindergarten through second grade. As part of the new **Commonwealth Accountability Testing System,** students take the California Test of Basic Skills when they finish the state's ungraded primary program (normally equivalent to the end of third grade). Many schools use the **Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP),** a model assessment developed as part of Kentucky's primary program, in reporting student progress and making instructional decisions for kindergarten through third grade. The KELP assessment does not focus on reading specifically, but it does include general measures of reading progress.

Maryland has no statewide reading assessments for kindergarten and first grade. The state uses the verbal portion of the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS-V) every year to test a sample of stu-

dents in each district in second, fourth and sixth grades; beginning in 1999-2000 all students in these grades must take the test. While the CTBS can provide some useful information about children's individual needs, it is most useful for tracking children's collective progress. Selected schools statewide are using either the **Work Sampling Program** developed at the University of Michigan or a locally modified version to assess pre-reading skills in prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Under **Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act** of 1997, schools are required to assess all students in grades one through three with "multiple ongoing assessments." The state has not designated one specific assessment. The state Department of Education refers schools to the **Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's (SEDL) Reading Assessment Instruments Toolkit,** which includes information on more than 100 reading assessments, as a resource for first and second grades. Beginning in third grade, students must take the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The state Department of Education has developed a list of **Priority Academic Skills** in language arts that teachers can use in developing curricula and in evaluating students' progress in grades one through 12. The department also developed the **Phonics Tool Kit,** which provides additional guidance on assessment and instruction in that area.

The **Tennessee** Department of Education is developing a primary reading manual, which includes early assessment, for prekindergarten through third grade. The manual probably will include reviews of assessments the department deems appropriate. Beginning in spring 1999, all principals are required to report to the department on second-grade enrollment and the percentages of students who are at or above grade level in reading and math. The state did not specify a particular assessment. The requirement is intended to ensure that students are assessed continually from the time they start school to the spring of second grade and that they receive appropriate instruction.

Under **West Virginia's Statewide Assessment Program,** all children in grades one through 12 are assessed for accountability purposes each spring, with first and second grades using a norm-referenced test that focuses on reading. In 1999, the state Board of Education accepted a comprehensive plan for reading, called ***Reading for All,*** that the Department of Education developed. One goal of the plan is to develop student achievement indicators that are both diagnostic and performance-based and that indicate level of mastery. The department is reviewing ongoing informal assessments for kindergarten through second grade that can be used to assess children's reading achievement. These assessments will be made consistent with anticipated revisions in how reading is taught in West Virginia.

Observations

Accurate, reliable assessment of children's reading skills is essential if proven methods of teaching reading are to work in the classroom. When combined with appropriate and broad-ranging instructional skills, early assessment offers the promise of teaching virtually every child to read.

Several SREB states, as reported here, have moved quickly and aggressively to put high-quality assessments in teacher's hands and to ensure some consistency in assessment standards. These varied efforts assess students at different points in their school experiences and have different approaches to getting schools to use the assessments. Even though the assessments may look quite different, however, they consistently focus on essentially the same basic competencies in word recognition and comprehension. The most effective efforts are likely to be those that clearly recognize that learning to read is a fluid, progressive process and that ongoing assessment is needed for teachers to respond to different children's changing needs.

Even the most advanced state programs for reading assessment are relatively new, and there is much yet to learn about timing and methodologies. Making time to administer accurate, reliable individual assessments will remain an issue. However, if good assessment leads to improved instruction and better reading performance, teachers and administrators likely will realize that the time allocated for assessments is time well spent.

The SREB will continue to follow states' reading initiatives and the experiences with different assessment models to ensure that policy-makers in every state benefit from the region's collective experiences.

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